DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 462 CS 209 538

AUTHOR Kies, Daniel
TITLE A Functional Linguistic View of Language Development: Common Links between Writing Centers, Composition Courses, and the Academy.
PUB DATE 18 Oct 85
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference (St. Louis, MO, October 18-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; College English; English (Second Language); *English Instruction; Etymology; Higher Education; Language Patterns; Language Usage; *Linguistics; Morphology (Languages); Phonology; Syntax; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Functional Linguistics; *Linguistic Analysis

ABSTRACT

A discussion of what functional linguistic research can offer teachers of composition and English is presented in this paper, which provides examples of different levels of analysis (phonology, morphology, and syntax) for the language of a variety of populations (including traditional freshmen, basic writers, English as a second language (ESL) students, and nontraditional, re-entering adult students). The paper presents the aims and theoretical orientation of functional linguistics, discusses how functional linguistics can provide insight into the processes used by ESL students acquiring English phonology, and shows how functional analysis can be used to correct the problem of overusing and misusing nonrestrictive relative clauses. It then shows how functional analysis can inform advanced and adult composition students of the uses and value of various stylistic language patterns, using the functions of the passive voice as an example, and recommends increasing students' awareness of derivational morphology and its role in word formation in English. (EL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED266462

A FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT:

Common Links between Writing Centers, Composition Courses, and the Academy

Daniel Kies

Governors State University
University Park, IL 60466

(312) 534-5000

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Daniel Kies

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS209538

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Writing Centers Association in St. Louis, Missouri on October 18, 1985

A FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT:

Common Links Between Writing Centers, Composition Courses, and the Academy

Daniel Kies
Governors State University

ABSTRACT

Administrators and faculty agree that composition, whether in the writing center or the classroom, is a necessary part of any institution's educational program, but the academy views such instruction as secondary in importance to research or the other curricular objectives. Indeed, administrators and faculty describe composition merely as a skill or technique, not an integrated body of knowledge (cf., Mike Rose, "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the Univeristy," College English, 47 (1985), 341-359). However, functional linguistic analyses of college students' prose may help to heal the schism between composition and the rest of the curriculum since functional linguistics reveals the complex linguistic and psychological processing necessary to acquire written language, a worthy study for any institution. This paper illustrates the "intelligence of [students'] mistakes" (Mina Shaughnessy, Error and Expectations, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 11) with examples from different levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, and syntax) by a variety of populations (including traditional freshmen, basic writers, ESL students, and non-traditional, re-entering adult students).

A FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT:

Common Links Between Writing Centers, Composition Courses, and the Academy

Daniel Kies
Governors State University

INTRODUCTION

Enough has been written recently to convince anyone that students are not the only people who have naive notions about the processes of composition or language development generally. Mike Rose (1985) illustrated some of the limiting assumptions and misconceptions held by administrators who see composition merely as a skill or technique, not an integrated body of knowledge. Similarly, Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) argued that several myths about writing evaluation and improvement are shared by administrators, students, and even many professionals who teach writing. Both of the cited works bemoan the attitudes that lead people to attempt to quantify writing improvement, attitudes that give people uniformed ideas of what constitutes writing competency, and attitudes that mislead composition instructors by allowing them to develop curricula based upon inadequate ideas about the processes of composing and general language development.

That is the atmosphere in which most writing centers and composition programs survive. Administrators and faculty agree that composition, whether in the writing center or the classroom, is a necessary part of any institution's educational program, but the academy views such instruction as secondary in importance to research or the other curricular objectives. However, from my point of view, if writing centers and composition programs hope to thrive, then the assumptions underlying our notions of language development and composition must evolve beyond the concepts skills or techniques. Functional linguistic analyses of college students' language help to close the schism between com-

position and the rest of the curriculum by revealing the complex linguistic processing necessary to acquire and/or improve language abilities--a worthy research program for any institution. My goal here is to illustrate the value of functional linguistics for research into and the teaching of the English language through examples from different levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, morphology, and syntax) by a variety of populations (including traditional freshmen, basic writers, ESL students, and non-traditional, re-entering adult students). However before that, allow me to outline briefly the aims and theoretical orientation of functional linguistics.

THE THEORETICAL ORIENTATION OF FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS

Functional linguistics describes and explains language structures through analyses of the communicative uses or purposes served by those particular language structures. Many approaches in linguistics (including the most popular and influential approach, transformational generative theory) focus on the form of linguistic sturctures, paying little heed to the functions that those forms might serve. The functional linguist holds to the tenet that function determines form and searches for the communicative function that explains the linguistic form of an utterance.

To discover the differences between functional and formal approaches, consider these facts about relative pronoun deletion. Sentences (1) and (2) demonstrate that we may optionally delete object pronouns from the object position in the clause.

(1) The cat that the dog chased is in the tree.

(2) The cat the dog chased is in the tree.

Yet sentences (3) and (4) reveal that we may not delete relative pronouns from subject position in the clause.

(3) The dog that chased the cat ran away.

(4) *The dog chased the cat ran away.

One version of transformational generative theory explains the unacceptability of (4) by positing a constraint upon possible sentence structures in English, and sentence (4) violates that constraint, cf. Perlmutter (1971) and Chomsky and Lasnik(1977). Yet functional linguistic theory would explain the unacceptability of (4) by arguing that something must function as a signal for the beginning of a relative clause, either the relative pronoun, as in sentences (1) and (3), or the sequence of two noun phrases immediately before a finite verb, as in sentence (2). In sentence (4), neither signal is present, allowing the reader/hearer to misinterpret chased as the main clause verb. Sentence (4) is unacceptable because nothing functions to signal the beginning of the relative clause: linguistic function determines linguistic form.

PHONOLOGY AND THE STUDENT OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Phonology, the sound patterns of a language, is one of the first linguistic systems studied by students learning English as a second language, and it is one of the last linguistic systems to be mastered. In "A Functional Explanation of Some Phonological Typologies," Dinnsen and Eckman (1975) present what I believe to be an ideal example of how functional linguistic research can provide insight into the processes used by ESL students acquiring English phonology. Furthermore, by understanding the developmental process of acquiring phonological systems, one can construct curricula and pedagogical techinques that reflect the findings of research.

Dinnsen and Eckman consider the cross-linguistic facts about voice contrast in obstruents (sounds made by some obstruction in the oral cavity) in word-medial and -final position. The Dinnsen and Eckman (1975) data on voice con-

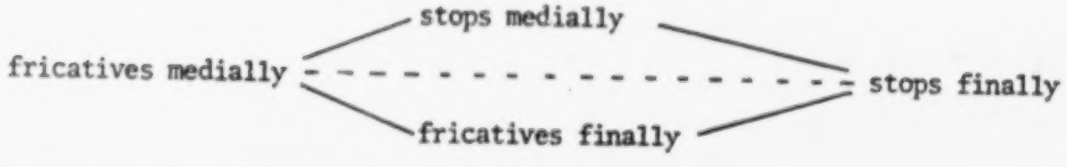
trast in two environments:

VOICING CONTRASTS

TYPE/EXAMPLE	STOPS MEDIALLY	STOPS FINALLY	FRICATIVES MEDIALLY	FRICATIVES FINALLY
A/ENGLISH	+	+	+	+
B/OLD HIGH ENGLISH	+	+	+	-
C/GERMAN	+	-	+	-
D/OLD ENGLISH	+	+	-	-
E/SPANISH	+	-	-	-
TOTALS	5	3	3	1

Dinnsen and Eckman note that only those five types of languages are attested from the various logical possibilities. From the distribution of the voicing contrast (sounds produced with and without vibration of the vocal folds) between stops (e.g., sounds represented by the letters p, b, t, d, k, g) and fricatives (e.g., sounds represented by the letters f, v, s, and z) in those two positions, they develop the following hierarchy of implicational relations.

Universal Hierarchy of Voicing Contrasts



The hierarchy outlines the implicational relations between all the nodes in the hierarchy. The highest node, stops medially, is implied by all the lower nodes. Thus if a language has a voicing contrast in fricatives word-medially

and/or in stops word-finally, then it also has the contrast in stops medially. And if a language has a voicing contrast in fricatives finally, it implies that the language has a voicing contrast in all other obstruents in either environment. The broken line between fricatives medially and stops finally indicates that there is no implicational relationship between those two segment-types in those environments.

For Dinnsen and Eckman, that hierarchy captures an explanatory generalization governing voicing contrasts and neutralizations of that contrast. The generalization achieves explanatory potential (a) by predicting the voicing contrast of obstruents in various positions, (b) by providing a principled exclusion of the non-attested language types, e.g., a language which has a voicing contrast in stops finally but not stops medially, and (c) by being falsifiable.

The specific value of this hierarchy for the ESL teacher lies in its ability to predict that students from a particular native language background will have difficulty learning particular sounds in particular positions in the word. For example, the implicational hierarchy suggests that students with German as a native language would have difficulty learning a voice contrast in English fricatives only when those fricatives are in word-final position. On the other hand, the German student of Spanish should have no trouble learning voice contrasts in Spanish since Spanish uses a voice contrast familiar to the German student.

As useful as such predictions might be, Dinnsen and Eckman are interested in explaining why their hierarchy has the shape that it does. To attain the next level of explanation, Dinnsen and Eckman look to physiology to provide the necessary, empirically motivated laws which are explanatorily relevant.

That is, they need a law which relates the linguistic facts of the typology to independently verifiable facts about physiology. Specifically, Dinnsen and Eckman, following Malecot (1968), state that the duration of a particular segment-type in a particular environment is directly linked to the degree of difficulty involved in maintaining a voicing contrast in that segment-type in that environment. "Given this, it seems reasonable to assume that if a speaker can learn to maintain a voicing contrast in a given segment-type which has duration d_1 in a given environment, then a speaker can learn a fortiori to maintain a voicing contrast in all segment-types which have duration d_2 in a given environment, where d_1 is greater than d_2" (1975; 131). (As Sanders (1977) says, the learning of a more difficult task implies the ability to learn the less difficult). Also if d_1 is the longest duration a speaker has learned to distinguish or make for a voicing contrast, any segment-type in any environment which requires a voicing contrast of greater duration will be neutralized. Malecot (1968), in measuring the intraoral pressure, amplitude, and duration of stops and fricatives, found that stops have the shortest duration in medial position, fricatives have the longest duration in final position, medial stops have a shorter duration than either medial fricatives or final stops, and final stops have a shorter duration than final fricatives but are longer than medial stops. Thus, the independent findings of Malecot provide the relevant generalizations which explain the form of Dinnsen and Eckman's hierarchy.

Further, given these findings, one can make additional pedagogically useful deductions: if one learns to make a voice contrast in the most difficult case, between fricatives in word final position, then the hierarchy and facts about human physiology suggest that the voice contrast would be learned "free" in the less difficult cases, between stops finally, fricatives medially, and

stops medially. Thus the ESL student with Spanish as a native language should be able to make and distinguish voice contrasts in stops finally and fricatives medially if he masters a voice contrast for English fricatives in word-final position. So not only do functional analyses predict where language development problems arise, but functional analyses also suggest what sounds should be taught in what environment to maximize learning.

THE SYNTAX OF BASIC WRITERS

One area of college composition and language development that has received considerable attention recently is the prose of "basic writers." I am particularly interested in the functions served by various clauses in the complex sentences written by basic writers. Expecially fascinating are the functions of non-restrictive relative clauses. Those clauses occur frequently in the prose style of basic writers and, as one would expect, usually function as modifying structures, adding to the semantic information of the modified head noun, but not helping to identify the reference of the head noun. That is the most frequent use of non-restrictive relative clauses in English. For an example, observe the overwhelming frequency of non-restrictive relative clauses in the paragraph below, written by a freshman basic writer.

> However, there were some negative experiences which I encountered. Some of the negative experiences were the inability of many of the foster parents to attempt to understand many of the needs of these foster children. In my opinion many of the parents living with these children need councelling or family councelling between the children and the foster parents in order to alleviate many of the lack of communications which were revealed which counselling some of these children such as lack of empathities listening from parents' lack of support, in many of the cildren's problem which often would cause the child to give other forms of substitution, many of which were relating to some criminal tendencies such as petty theft, lack of interest in school studies, lack of modivation in general, a general feeling of not being loved and understood, which often was revealed to the counselor. Many and more of these unplesant experiences could be corrected, if the foster parents were more aware of some of their children's needs in family counselling

and therapy.

The syntactic problem destroying the paragraph's clarity is the extraordinary use of relative clauses to embed many propositions into one sentence. Notice how the five relative clauses, introduced by which, create a very difficult right-branching sentence structure. By embedding a total of six subordinate clauses into one sentence, of which five seem to be modifying relative clauses, the writer taxes the reader's ability to decode and to store all of the modifying information in short term memory. A schematic presentation demonstrates the difficulty more dramatically:

Main Clause

Adverbial	Subject	Verb	Object
In my opinion	many of the parents living with these children	need	councelling or family councelling

Infinitive Subordinate Clause

Subordinator	Verb	Object
in order	to alleviate	many of the lack of communications

Relative Clause A
which were revealed

Relative Clause B
which councelling some of the children...
in many of the children's problem

Relative Clause C
which often would cause a child to give
other forms of substitution

Relative Clause D
many of which were relating to some
criminal tendencies...

Relative Clause E
which often was revealed to the counselor.

When one looks beyond the immediately obvious modification function of the non-restrictive relative clauses, one sees another function intended by the writer--a use of non-restrictive modification comparable to coordination. As Quirk et al. (1972: 873) point out, the loose non-restrictive relationship between a relative clause and its antecedent is often semantically indistinguishable from coordination (with or without a conjunction), as indicated by examples (5) and (6) below.

(5) He met the chairperson, { who invited him to the meeting. / and she invited him to the meeting.

(6) Here come the Gladstone boys { , whom I mentioned to you yesterday. / ; I mentioned them to you yesterday.

From a functional point of view, the non-restrictive relative clauses do not simply modify; instead relative clauses C, D, and E above are semantically (and functionally) equivalent to coordinated clauses. Given this functional analysis, instructors of basic writers need not risk inhibiting syntactic fluency by providing unnecessary instruction in the appropriate use of modifiers or in the appropriate use of subordination. Rather instructors would do more for their students by using this analysis to enhance the basic writers' fluency. Basic writing instructors, recognizing the writers' purpose, would contribute to the students' fluency by providing instruction about the various devices available in the language for connecting clauses. The functional analysis presented here provides a better diagnostic tool for the instructor, and it presents a system for the students--a system through which the students see how their language use is part of, but consistently different from, contemporary language use.

THE SYNTAX OF ADVANCED AND ADULT COMPOSITION STUDENTS

Advanced composition and adult students are often more interested in studying the stylistic options available to them as they continue to learn

about the composing process. Here too functional linguistics can help to inform students of the uses and value of various stylistic patterns in the language. For example, consider the functions of the passive voice sentence in business and technical writing. Granted, most handbooks, textbooks, and instructors of business and technical writing often prohibit any use of passive voice constructions or severely restrict its use.

Yet as detailed more fully in Kies (1985), the passive voice serves a variety of essential functions in the prose style of business and technical writers. First, passive constructions often function as linking verb and adjective rather than auxiliary verb and participial verb, cf. (7).

(7) a. John is tired.

b. Students are often more interested in style.

Second, passive constructions maintain a topic of conversation, cf. (8). Examples (8) through (12) are from Rivers (1980) or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (1980).

(8) Now for some of our measurements. Within the 20 largest oil companies, we rank 16th in gasoline sales, 17th in distillate sales, and 18th in refining capacity. We are recognized as a "major" oil company by many, but... (Rivers, p. 29)

Third, passive construction provides coherence in a text by inverting the active voice subject and object noun phrases, cf. (9).

(9) Refining, Marketing and Transportation is responsible for Cities Service Company's oil operations from the wellhead to the consumer--the downstream activities of the Company. Details of these operations are presented in the remainder of this booklet. (Rivers, p. 29)

Fourth, passive constructions avoid awkward, "heavy" subjects in the active voice, cf. (10).

(10) The three processing trains are supported by a hydrogen storage system, a liquid nitrogen storage system, and a noble gas storage system. (NRC, p. 6-24)

Fifth, passive voice allows end-focus (Quirk et al., (1972: 943)) on a constituent that is thematically or informationally prominent, cf. (11).

(11) We have always been a leader in the development of joint venture pipeline systems. This best exemplified by Colonial Pipeline, the world's largest and most successful products system. (Rivers, p. 39)

Sixth, the passive is necessary when the agent is unknown or unimportant. Finally, the passive is useful when the writer desires to conceal the agent. Example (12) could illustrate either function depending on the writer's knowledge of the agent (and his willingness to protect him from public scorn).

(12) The Krypton-85 (Kr-85) released to the reactor building during the accident at TMI-2 must be removed.... (NRC, p. 1-1)

Students, however, often imitate style without completely comprehending the purpose or uses served by stylistic options, and this again is where research in functional linguistics can inform the teaching of composition. Before a discussion of the uses of passive voice, students in an advanced business writing course often used the passive inappropriately, cf. (13)

(13) a. Thank you for generating excellent sales in the first quarter of 1983. Your speedy repairs and on-time delivery of products are well appreciated.

b. Over the last few months you have been sent letters requesting you to submit your S E Forms before or on the 10th of each month.

c. As one of Blaylock's best sales dealers, I don't want to see you get in trouble over this matter of late forms. I have been informed that if this situation is not reversed stern action will be taken such as fewer rewards or a talk with the Senior Vice President Marketing.

The passive voice allows writers to omit the agent (the person or thing responsible for the action described by the verb) from the sentence. The loss of agency destroys the sincerity of the last sentence in (13a) and creates an unnecessarily hostile tone in (13c). Sentence (13b) is simply poorly written from an information point of view: if correspondence is filed by company name or correspondent's name, how does one check one's files to verify the validity of (13b)?

However, after a discussion of the communicative functions of passive voice, the same student wrote

> The SE Accounting Form important to you for two main reasons. The form helps to determine what equipment modifications are needed to improve the quality of Blaylock products. Product modifications will help to reduce the number of service calls you make. Secondly, the form is used to set distribution priorities to dealerships such as yours.

Notice the adjectival nature of needed, equivalent to necessary in that context, and the cohesive function of the passive the form is used. Rather than prohibiting a particular type of sentence, functional analyses give the writer more effective communicative tools.

MORPHOLOGY

For a number of students, many "mechanical" errors involve the system of inflectional morphology, e.g., subject-verb agreement, distinguishing the genitive case 's from the plural s, pronoun case problems (who versus whom

or between you and I versus between you and me), and a host of others. Inflectional systems, though, seem transparent to many students: they do not notice them and/or are not aware of how or why inflectional systems function as they do.

"Creative" inflection errors are one avenue by which instructors can use a student's mistake to teach a lesson about the functions of inflection systems. For example, when concluding an essay in which a student assessed herself as a writer, she wrote, "One day, I hope to publicate a book." Publicate is an error of derivational morphology: publicate is a possible, but unattested, English word. The error is creative in the sense that the student is using a process of derivational morphology, called back-formation, to create the word from publication, in the same way that automate derives from automation. By explaining this and other "creative" errors, the student becomes sensitive to the function of derivational morphology and its role in word formation in English.

The next step is to exploit the student's new awareness of derivational morphology to increase awareness of inflectional morphology. In that way, the student sees the systematic nature of English morphology at work, begins to understand its purpose, and becomes more attentive to mechanical errors of inflectional morphology like agreement or case.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, I have only discussed what functional linguistic research has to offer for teachers of composition and English language at various levels. Yet I must emphasize that functional linguistic research of this type is possible only by studying extensive corpora; therefore, English language instructors have much to offer this research program. Further, I hope I have demonstrated how this research program integrates the work done in writing centers and

composition programs into the broader missions of academia--enhancing knowledge through research and conveying knowledge through teaching.

Also, I hope I have demonstrated that developing language ability at any level is not a composite of a well defined subset of "skills." Rather, functional linguistics reveals the complexity of language development and the "intelligence of [students'] mistakes" (Shaughnessy 1977: 11). I fervently believe that it is necessary to do more than to give advice about particular sentences, paragraphs, or essays. To enable students to write successfully, it is necessary to give them a methodology, a system, with which they can analyze and evaluate their own writing in the process of improving it.

Admittedly, my perspective on the process of language development is a limited one, but I do believe that this approach offers valuable insights, which enable us, as educators, to facilitate language acquisition, in the broadest sense of that term.

REFERENCES

Chomsky, N. and Lasnik, H. (1977). "Filters and Control," Linguistic Inquiry 8, pp. 425-504.

Dinnsen, D. and Eckman, F. (1975). "A Functional Explanation of Some Phonological Typologies," Papers From the Parasession on Functionalism, pp. 126-134. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.

Kies, D. (1985). "Some Stylistic Features of Business and Technical Writing: The Functions of Passive Voice, Nominalization, and Agency," Journal of Technical Writing and Communication 15, pp. 299-308.

Knoblauch, C. and Brannon, L. (1984). Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing. Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook.

Malecot, A. (1968). "The Force of Articulation of American Stops and Fricatives as a Function of Position," Phonetica 18, pp. 95-102.

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Staff (1980). Environmental Assessment for Decontamination of the Three Mile Island Unit 2 Reactor Building Atmosphere. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

Perlmutter, D. (1971). Deep and Surface Structure Constraints in Syntax. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik (1972). A Grammar of Contemporary English. London: Longman.

Rivers, William (1980). Business Reports: Samples from the "Real World," Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentince-Hall, Inc.

Rose, M. (1985). "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University, " College English 47, pp. 341-359.

Sanders, G. (1977). "A Functional Typology of Elliptical Coordinations," in Eckman (ed.) Current Themes in Linguistics, pp. 241-270. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere Publishing.

Shaughnessy, M. (1977). Errors and Expectations. New York: Oxford University Press.